

5-26-2024

The Complexity of the Veil

Muskan Khan
Linfield University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englstud_theses



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Khan, Muskan, "The Complexity of the Veil" (2024). *Senior Theses*. 39.
https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englstud_theses/39

This Thesis (Open Access) is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield, with permission from the rights-holder(s). Your use of this Thesis (Open Access) must comply with the [Terms of Use](#) for material posted in DigitalCommons@Linfield, or with other stated terms (such as a Creative Commons license) indicated in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, or if you have questions about permitted uses, please contact digitalcommons@linfield.edu.

The Complexity of the Veil

by Muskan Khan

*Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing*

Linfield University

May 26, 2024

Approved by _____
Prof. Jesse Donaldson

The Complexity of the Veil

Muskan Khan

Abstract

Women fight injustices and underrepresentation all over the world, however, the women's right movement does not look the same all over the world. Every country and every woman is fighting for different rights that they need, but not all women share the same experiences when it comes to the women's rights movement. There are many intersections that determine the experiences of every individual woman. One of the intersections this paper will examine is the lived experience of women and Islam and the intersections between identity and gender in the Arab world.

It's important to note that in this paper, although the theme of gender and religion will be explored, not all Arab women identify as Muslim and not all Muslim women are Arab. There is no one way to be a woman who is Muslim, and every Muslim woman has their own experiences. Despite this, many people, many westerners, even western women, argue as though Islam is the sole reason women in the Arab world face oppression. It is a fear of Islam that extends to their own homelands, fear that can be seen in backlash against Muslim women who adorn the veil. Headscarf bans in France. Bans in Austria, Belgium, and Denmark.

Like the complicated relationship between Islam and Arab identity, the veil has a complicated symbolic meaning in both the Eastern and Western worlds. In the Eastern world, the veil is a symbol of protection, the protection worn when their countries were getting invaded during war. The idea of women having a safe space besides their home was no longer there so when women needed to go anywhere besides their house, they needed to veil. In the western world, well, it still provides protection but it also evokes fear.

In this paper, I will look at the intersections between Islam, the veil, gender, and Arab identity through the story collections of *The Sea Cloak* by Nayrouz Qarmout and *Hijabistan* by Sabyn Javeri. These stories explore the lives of Muslim women in both the Eastern and Western world. They also explore the idea of the veil and the different journeys these veiled Muslim

women take. And in the process, I hope I will at least partially answer the question: what does the women's rights movement in the Arab world actually look like?

Introduction

The veil, a simple cloth that was used by women of various religions to cover themselves, has become a symbol of both protection and oppression, depending on where it is a topic of conversation in the Western world or Eastern world, a symbol that became especially loaded after the events of 9/11. In Moustafa Bayoumi's book, *How Does It Feel To Be A Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America*, he chronicles the lives of Arab and Muslim youth after the attacks of September 11th, 2001. The title of his book derives from a question posed a century ago by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* and given the events that had occurred to Arab and Muslim Americans after September 11th, Bayoumi felt that this was an accurate question to pose. The title of his book ties into the long history of racism that has occurred in American history. From the Native Americans to the slaves that were brought into this country and then the Jim Crow laws that were put in place once those slaves had been "freed," America has had a consistent cycle of racism in the country. Before the attacks, Bayoumi points out that Arab and Muslim people were mostly unknown to the American eye. Afterwards, the labels "dangerous" and "terrorist" were placed on Muslim and Arab Americans. Bayoumi has multiple stories in his book like Rasha's story, when this young 19-year-old was taken from her home and placed in a jail with her family after 9/11 because her family had become a suspect. Or Rami, who was questioned consistently about why he was Muslim which led to him questioning his faith and the God he believed in. And then there is Yasmin who was riding a bus when another Muslim woman on the bus with a baby was questioned by a white couple on whether she had a baby underneath the blanket or a bomb.

After the 9/11 attacks, France was one of the first countries in the European Union to ban both the burqa and the niqab in public places in 2010, referring to them as a sign of “oppression” (Shankar, 2023). Other countries like Denmark, Bulgaria, Belgium and Austria followed France’s lead. Over a decade later, in July of 2021, the E.U. ruled that women could be fired from their jobs if they refused to remove their hijabs at their work in public if the individual countries within the E.U. decided to implement the laws for public employees. The idea behind this was that it allows there to be a “neutral” image and it is justified to prohibit any visible forms of religious garments. This paper’s aim is to discuss the symbol of the veil and how it’s not black and white symbol acknowledging its complexity, due to feminism in the West constructing a negative connotation of the veil, complicating the intersectionality of being Muslim, a woman, and a citizen of the any nation east or west.

Literature Review

For so long there has been a lack of representation when it comes to Arab feminism and the lack of Arab female scholars that examine Arab feminism in our society. There are few scholarly writers that focus on Arab feminism, especially in Western countries. The Western world has shaped Arab feminism for far too long. The lack of representation from Arab scholars has hurt Muslim women and Arab women, who need the feminist movement in their countries. Many women in these Arab countries that fight for their rights are also putting their lives at risk, whether it is with them dishonoring their family or the government repressing these women from speaking out. Lila Abu-Lughod is the new shift of contemporary scholars looking at Arab feminism.

In Lila Abu-Lughod’s book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, the critic confronts not only the general misconceptions of what the veil represents—especially to western eyes—but

also reveals how the veil is not viewed the same way across the Eastern world and that there are many women who have personal relationships with the veil that are shaped by their specific faith practices, national-state, regional customs, and personal beliefs.

Abu-Lughod tells us about the experiences of Pashtun women in Afghanistan when it comes to the veil and misconceptions. She states that it's commonly thought the Taliban forces these women in Afghanistan to wear a blue burqa. Many liberal women in the west assumed that when the United States of America invaded Afghanistan and removed the Taliban from power that Afghani women would throw off their burqas and were surprised when that was not the case. The reason why women were not quick to remove their burqa according to Abu-Lughod is that it was known that this was a local form of covering that all Pashtun women in the region wore when they went out. Pashtun women are an ethnic group that choose the veil as a form of covering, as a way of symbolizing "women's modesty or respectability," (Abu-Lughod, 35). The blue burqa was used as a way to mark a symbolic separation between men and women in public spaces.

This was one case where an ethnic group of women chose to adorn the veil but then there are also cases like Dr. Suheila Siddiqi chose not to veil. According to Abu-Lughod, Dr. Suheila Siddiqi was a respected surgeon in Afghanistan who was a lieutenant general in the Afghan medical corps. She refused to wear a burqa and was viewed as the woman who stood up to the Taliban. There are different ways in which Muslim women choose the way they want to cover. Pashtun women choose to adorn the veil as they view it as a symbol of respectability and modesty while Dr, Suehila Siddiqi, who is also Afghani, chose to not adorn the veil. Many women in Muslim countries, whether they are Muslim or not, fight against the patriarchy in these countries placed by the men in government for their own personal choices. It's important to acknowledge that there are ways in which the veil has been used to oppress women but these two

polar opposite experiences of Muslim women and their relationship with the veil show that every experience for Muslim women is unique and it is a harmful rhetoric that the Western world pushes on Muslim women who choose to veil.

There have been general misconceptions of what the veil and Muslim women represent in the Western world after September 11th, 2001. In the book *Arab & American Feminism: Gender, Violence, & Belonging* edited by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber, the editors support Abu-Lughod's point that the events after 9/11 seriously affected the representation of Muslim women. Specifically in Mervat F. Hatem's chapter, "The Political and Cultural Representations of Arabs, Arab Americans, and Arab American Feminisms after September 11, 2001," Hatem discusses how the events of 9/11 introduced complex challenges to American society and its citizens, primarily Arab-Americans and Muslim women who adorned the veil. Hatem talks about how the attacks of 9/11 led to a general suspicion of Arabs and Arab and Muslim Americans, who were seen by the larger public as homogeneously complicit in these horrific events. As a result, members of these distinct but overlapping communities (especially women in Islamic dress) bore the brunt of the early attacks by an angry American public," (Hatem, 11). Though the attacks of September 11 were carried out by Arab men from a specific Arab paramilitary group, the American public lumped all Muslims and Arab Muslims into one group, regardless if they had anything to do with the tragic attacks. Immediately after the attacks, Muslim women tried their best to educate Americans about their Muslim attire and experience with their religion. Some men in the Muslim community argued that it was important for Muslim women to take off their veil for their safety, since there was an increase in hate crimes towards Muslims, forcing women to choose between their faith and culture or their safety. Hatem notes that many Muslim women were shocked that people from their own communities would promote Muslim women taking their veils off. The veil, always a symbol of protection, had become a way

for Muslim women to exercise their freedom in America, a way to maintain some sense of personal identity while living as an immigrant in a new land. Samira Alayan and Lana Shehadeh briefly touch on how the veil has become a controversial topic as well as a symbol used in politics in their journal, *Religious symbolism and politics: hijab and resistance in Palestine*. They discuss how the veiling of Muslim women has become a political statement while it also provides a source of identity for many Muslim women. After September 11th, the misconceptions of the veil spread throughout the Western world caused the veil to become a garment that could court danger, a symbol of increasing western oppression.

There is also a common misconception that this idea of the veiling has to do with the rise of Islam in the Middle East. Although veiling is required for Muslim women to do in their religion, veiling has been a common practice since even before Islam. In Nawar Al-Hassan Golley journal, *Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?* she discusses how there are multiple theories on how the veil originated as an Arab garment. The three theories are that it was introduced with the idea of the harem, by the Ottomans at some stage during the Ottoman Empire sometime between 1299 and 1922, that it came from Persia and women that were high status adorned the veil between 1400 and 1100 BC. The veil was known to many civilizations but was introduced to Muslim women in the 5th year of Islam. In the Prophet's (PBUH) family, the women were the first women to veil since many Muslims had not for the first couple years of Islam. The Prophet's (PBUH) family was the first representation of Muslim women veiling in Islam. Prior to Islam, there were societies, like the Assyrian society, that viewed the veil as a symbol of the upper class and was a way to divide the women into two groups: the respectable women and the women who were viewed as publicly available.

In many ways, the veil as a concept is on a similar path of the term 'harem,' which has been around for centuries, though its "western" meaning has never quite matched the world's

eastern origins. . A harem, like a veil, is further misunderstood because it has been exoticized in the west. . According to Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's journal, *Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?*, the word 'harem' can be used to mean simply women. *Hareem* is derived from the word *haraam* meaning 'sacred', 'forbidden', 'inviolable' and 'holy.'" (Golley, 523). In short, the harem was a space for women and children; men were not allowed to enter. Golley discusses that because of the colonizer's eyes, the harem in the Western world is seen as an exotic place, which further affects the women in the Arab world. A space that was created for women to gather, spend time with each other, as well as help the men on the outside by the discussions of politics that would happen, both inside and outside of the harem. Due to the Western world invading these safe spaces made for women in the Eastern world, it affected the way men in the Eastern world viewed these safe spaces for their women. The men in the East no longer believed that the harem could be a safe place for women. "Because the image of the harem, as known to the West, has been greatly affected by ethnographic writing about the Middle East, most of which has been done by men, it is only fair to say that the writers' deception of the harem cannot be authentic-as alien men they could not have any access to any true harem, or female quarter," (Golley, 523). Due to the invasion of these women spaces by the Western gaze, the spaces could not be trusted that they would only be for women.

The harem was created by women to create a space that is just meant for them to connect with other women and not have to worry about men who weren't their family members. They wanted a space in which they could be free. They were able to engage in different activities. their bodies are made when they take the veil off. The bland face becomes colorful with creative make-up. The loose dress of the veil, once taken off, revealed underneath fashionable clothing, making a more individual and personal statement than the collective public one of the veil." (Odeh, 34). When women are able to express themselves however they please in the Harem

historically, the Harem also became a safe space in which women were able to express themselves and their sexuality. The harem is a place in which women can dress however they please and they do not need to cover their bodies, even if the world outside of the Harem was conservative and implemented their conservative views on society.

In Lama Abu Odeh's journal, *Post-colonial Feminism And The Veil: Thinking the Difference*, Odeh discusses how at the end of the day, the idea of the veil comes down to Arab women not being able to express themselves sexually and that in the societies, women can face violence for not veiling. "In a social context, such as one in the Arab world, where women can incur violent sanctions if they express themselves sexually, such acts carry important normative weight to me as a feminist." (Odeh, 31). When there are no spaces in public for women to express their bodies as they want or they will potentially have to face consequences like Odeh mentions, it was important that there were safe spaces like the harem for Muslim women. The harem, just like the veil, had many forms. The size of the harem determined your family's financial success and some women used it as a way to impact their communities. The harem is an important part of women in the Arab world because it has been seen as this "exotic" place filled with women by the Western lens but in fact, it is a safe space for women to be themselves and create new relations with other women.

In Amel Grami's journal, *Freedom of speech in contemporary Arab societies from a gender perspective*, we see how politics can play a huge role in the women's rights movement in the Arab world and what they look like in Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria. One way politics has been playing a role in trying to "control" activists and women in these countries has been charges being thrown at them. As Grami mentions, there were many tools used to silence women by throwing fake charges about false news that was being spread on social media; when women were talking about women rights. Many women activities were "living under fear, threats, or

jailed because of their opinions, are often not named or invisibilized.” (Grami, 582). Women are being silenced by their own governments for speaking out because they are making their country look bad. An example that Grami uses is how in Tunisia, although their constitution guarantees that right to freedom of expression in Article 31, many activists are being prosecuted for their online expressions. In Egypt, there has been an eradication of freedom of expression that has caused many to be cautious of their actions. In Saudi Arabia, very prominent activists, scholars, and writers have been thrown in prison and torture in 2014. They have been branded as traitors for advocating for women's rights. In Algeria, there have been many repressive laws that have been put in place to prosecute dozens of peaceful protestors. There are many more governments in the Arab society that can be named who are silencing and forcing women into submission by putting these laws and policies in place. Grami says it best, “submission is more appealing to women than men. That is not to say that women actively choose submission but they consent to the submission that is prescribed to them by social norms and gender order.” (Grami, 585). There are Islamist governments that restrict women’s rights but this is not limited to just Islamic countries. Many democracies, like the United States, have yet to fully immerse themselves in the women’s rights movement and embrace it in their democracy. Although the Western countries may view Arab women to be oppressed, it is important to acknowledge that both the Western and Eastern world both share the same challenges, that women across the world have to fight for their rights.

Although not all Arab people are Muslim and not all Muslim people are Arab, Islam does play a role in the connection with the women's rights movement. In Saiyma Aslam’s journal, *Resurrecting Arab Feminism, Nationalism, and Colonialism from Social Amnesia*, she discusses the history of Islam, including sections in Medina during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and how women and men were given equal opportunities. Women and men were both

encouraged to go to the mosque and they both had the right to initiate divorce, something that was frowned upon in many Muslim communities. Despite these equal opportunities given during the Prophet's time, there has been a shift in what the women's rights movement looks like in the Eastern world.

Nonetheless it is clearly stated in the Quran, the holy book in Islam, that a woman needs to veil when going outside of her home. In Surah An-Nur, it states that "And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their head covers over their chests and not expose their adornment [i.e., beauty] except to their husband, their fathers, their husband's father, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, that which their right hands possess [i.e., slaves], or those male attendants having no physical desire, 4 or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment," (Quran, 24:31). In Islam, unless permitted, there are other ways for the list of the family members that can see a female without their veil, but they must be covered when there are non-Mahram men around. Mahram in Islam means a man in which a woman does not need to veil around. Yet, there were rebellious acts even in the early days of Islam. In Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's journal, *Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?*, she discusses how one of the first Muslim women to express their opposition to the veil was the Prophet's great-granddaughter. "Since the early days of Islam, Arab women have expressed their opposition to issues that they felt were oppressive to them, such as veiling. It is not possible here to list all the women known for discarding the veil; they are just too numerous. However, one example serves to oppose the system. One of the most famous early Muslim women, known for their acts of rebellion against

what they thought was diversion from the real teachings of the Prophet, was the Prophet's own great-granddaughter, Sukayan (born in AD 671),” (Golley, 527).

The Prophet (PBUH) was challenged by the younger females in his family members, with the newer generation challenging the older generation. This is not a foreign concept for the believers of Islam. Even Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the messenger of Allah, was questioned by his first wife, Khadija, on certain practices of Islam. It has been known throughout the history of Islam of women questioning the practices and rules.

The women’s rights movement in the Arab world became more organized or codified around the 19th century according to Nawar Al-Hassan Golley’s journal, *Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?* Since then, there has been a rise in the women’s rights movement with the influence from other women’s rights movements around the world. In Nawar Al-Hassan Golley’s journal, *Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?*, she discusses how the “orientalist discourses have influenced the way that Arab feminism, in particular, has been received and understood in the West,” (Golley, 522). The idea of the Orientalist discourse stems from Edward Said and the idea that the people in these Eastern spaces like the Middle East are heavily fetishized and stereotyped by the Western eye. The idea that feminism has not been around in the Arab world is a false notion and the effects of the idea of orientalism has affected women in the Arab world. Golley discusses how many women in the Western world who were a part of the women’s rights movement note that there is a tremendous difference in their eyes when it comes to the lives of Arab women and their lives. For many in the West, Arab women are defined as “heavily veiled up, secluded women, whose lives consist of little more than their homes, their children, and other females in the ‘harem’ or immediate kinship circle.” (Golley, 522). There is a common misinterpretation of the women in the Arab world and what the women’s rights

movement looks like for them because it is much more complex like mentioned in Lama Abu Odeh's journal *Post-colonial Feminism and The Veil: Thinking the Difference*.

Close Reading

The short story collection, *The Sea Cloak & Other Stories*, by Nayrouz Qarmout explores the lives of women in Gaza, Palestine, and Palestinian refugee camps in surrounding countries. The title story explores the life of a young girl in Palestine and the pressures of cultural norms as well as her relationship with the veil. The unnamed young girl was ordered by her mother to wear a veil when she was 10 years old. The young girl was caught playing with a boy outside their home, and her mother felt she needed to protect her daughter from the outside world. In this story, the veil is viewed as a symbol of protection in her mother's eyes as well as the place she is residing in. In Lama Abu Odeh journal, *Post-Colonial Feminism and the Veil: Thinking the Difference*, she discusses how being a woman in the Arab world who expresses themselves sexually is not normal and the veil helps to conceal women from potentially seducing men or grabbing any attention from other men. By being veiled, there should be no lingering eyes from men. The girl's mother is also under the same assumption that by having her daughter veil at a young age, there is a form of protection placed on this girl from the eyes of men in their community.

Although the veil is deemed as a symbol for protecting women in this story, that is not the case for this young girl. When she travels to the beach with her entire family on a hot summer day, she was expected to be completely covered from head to toe, especially since they were going to a place where other men would be at. When she was walking towards the water, she noticed a group of men playing cards. One of the men has turned around to watch the young girl, calling out to her with "chat-up lines," (Nayrouz, 7). Regardless of the fact that the symbol

of the veil was meant to be protection for this girl as she entered womanhood, it became contradictory. She was quick to be sexualized by a man as she walked by, not only by looking directly at her, but by the cat calling in front of everyone else. The veil, a simple piece of clothing, has become very complex in this story because although the young girl did not have a choice, her mother was trying to protect her and shield her from the outside world but at the end of the day, she was still sexualized. The cultural norm of why a young girl needs to veil is to divert the attention from them but especially their bodies as they transform from girlhood to womanhood. Culturally, when the transition from girlhood to womanhood occurs, the body needs to be protected from men, such as the man who felt permitted to cat call.

The generational difference is shown through *The Sea Cloak* with how differing the mother and the grandmother are. The mother is very focused on making sure that her daughter follows societal and cultural roles that are shown through the way there is a pressure put on her daughter to cover up her body. When they went to the beach, the mother was quick to make sure to set up the food and started cooking when they arrived at the beach while the rest of her family was able to relax. “She was preparing their lunchtime festivities, arranging the table just as it would be at home. It was only when she sat down that she realized how tired she was,” (Nayrouz, 5). While the mother is making sure everyone is fed and that their tent is set up at the beach, she is not able to enjoy the cool breeze of the beach or the water. On the other hand, the grandmother is sitting on a chair, enjoying the salty breeze, and smoking a cigarette. “Then there was Grandma, her embroidered dress fluttering in the breeze. She was chuckling away, an old cigarette balanced between her lips as she puffed out smoke and crooned melancholy folk songs of old,” (Nayrouz, 6). The grandmother is in the comfort of her embroidered dress whereas her daughter and granddaughter are covered from head to toe in a veil. The grandmother can enjoy the day while her daughter cooks and sets up for everyone. The generational difference between

the mother and granddaughter are astronomical. Although we don't know the life of the grandmother, we can see that she is able to enjoy her time and her life on this family trip. Her daughter, however, is too worried about keeping up with the pressure placed on her and continuing that cycle with her daughter.

On top of being emotionally weighed down, she is physically being weighed down by the veil when she goes into the water at the beach. When she is walking towards the water, she is quick to submerge herself to feel free and become one with the water. As she is swimming, she is going further out in the water, soaking in the sun on her face. She was struggling to catch her breath, but she wanted to continue swimming out, wanting to feel as light as a feather. Instead of being able to feel the freedom of floating in the water, the girl quickly starts to drown. Quickly, her clothing started to swirl around her arms and legs, consuming her body to where she could not move anymore. Her veil started to pull her down, no longer afloat, with fear growing inside of her. The fear of dying grew inside of her, but the fear of exposing herself to the world consumed her. "Her legs felt heavy with the material wrapped tightly around them and she wanted to pull it off but was afraid of her nakedness. She was afraid of death too, and of shame. She loved life and felt suddenly alone," (Nayrouz, 10). The girl did not want to die, she wanted to live but in that moment the fear of her body being exposed to the world and the shame that her family would feel overcame her fear of death. For a second, this girl accepted that she would have to sacrifice her body to save her family from the shame they would feel.

With the cultural and societal norms placed on her by her family, she knew how her family would react to what was happening to her in the water. She began to let herself become one with the water, giving up any strength she had to fight for her life when suddenly, she was swooped up by a muscular arm. Fear started to arise in her, the fear of a strange man touching her in public. She did not know whether to be grateful that she was about to be saved or to be

worried what her family would think if she was being carried out of the water by the strange man. Her family protected her body at a young age by veiling but the girl never felt that. Now being touched by a man who was not her family member, she felt something she had never felt before. She felt a sense of security for the first time in her life when this man had wrapped his arms around her, the feeling of being safe. Something that she had not felt with her family, even if they tried their best to protect her and make her feel safe by having her veil at a young age according to societal standards. She had felt many waves of emotions as she was being pulled out of the water but soon felt that fear come back to her as she watched her brother run towards them, ready to fight if he had to. Luckily, the man was quick to let her brother know that she was drowning and that he was able to save her. This young girl was physically being weighed down by the water due to her veil and she was ready to sacrifice her body when she was drowning so she would not bring immense shame to her family. The body has been used in this story to show how it can both be physically and emotionally weighed down. The body of this young girl is weighed down emotionally because she is forced to adorn the veil, which feels like she is being oppressed. By wearing the veil, she must carry the weight of the cultural and societal expectations of her, as she has now become a woman.

The personal identity of the girl seems to be stripped from the beginning of the book. She is forced to veil from ten years old, an age in which many young kids start to explore their personal identities through the clothing they wear. We also see how the young girl is never given a name throughout the story. A name holds a significant importance in every person's identity. Our name can be connected to many connections whether they are cultural, historical, familial, or even just personal. A name can reflect racial identity or a religious identity. There is also an impact of having a name when we belong to a community. The choice made of this young girl's

name not to be included in this short story can be used as a technique to allow the reader to place themselves in the shoes of this young girl and be able to understand her story differently.

In Sabyn Javeri's collection of short stories, *Hijabistan*, Javeri explores the theme of the women in the veil in a collection of sixteen short stories. Sabyn Javeri explores a particular story that focuses on a woman and her love for the veil. It's easy to buy into the Western notion that the veil is a symbol of oppression or the Eastern notion that the veil is a symbol used as protection. Not to diminish these stories of how the veil has been used as a symbol to oppress women, that is not the case in this story. Like Lila Abu-Lughod mentions in her book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Muslim women live all over the world. Muslim women all have different stories because there are so many factors that contribute to it. Abu-Lughod mentions different life experiences from women in Bangladesh, India, Egypt, and Afghanistan. All these countries have a complex history that contributes to the unique experiences of Muslim women. It is easy to blame a certain religion or culture for the oppression Muslim women face but Abu-Lughod points out how important it is as a society to look at the whole picture of what and who are to blame for the problems women face.

In this short story, *The Good Wife*, we see the story of a woman who decides to wear the veil against her husband's wishes. There is a certain relationship between this woman and her veil. She is very adamant on adorning herself with the veil that she will not even let her husband come in between it. "She believes that the hijab represents modest, peace and submission to Allah. It keeps her grounded. It protects her, defines her. She cannot understand why he would not want her to. But he is no longer there to resist it. And these days she is free to do as she places. No one to stop her, no one to question her," (Javeri, 195). The perspective of this woman and her relationship to veiling is something that is not often highlighted in the present day. There is a certain admiration and respect that she has for her religion including all the practices that are

in her religion. She cannot understand why her husband does not want her to veil. She assumes that since she married someone of the same faith as her, he too would want her to follow the practices of their religion. Her love for the religion shined through her and her actions as a Muslim woman who veiled. Her husband is worried for the safety of his wife when it comes to her choosing to fully veil from head to toe. He doesn't understand why she wants to draw attention to her, potentially negative attention, from others in the United Kingdom. "Look, husband, it's very simple, really. If people are going to measure all five fingers as equal, then that's their short-sightedness. I wear the hijab for myself for my Allah. And I would not feel complete without it. It is second skin to me," (Javeri, 198). Her husband does not understand that she wants to veil for the sake of Allah, but he must learn throughout the story to accept that his wife has made a decision that is sacred to her. Towards the end of the story, this good wife was approached by the police and questioned if she knew her husband was a terrorist since he was a part of a suicide bombing. The woman could not and would not believe what the police were telling her. How could her husband, a man who showed no interest in their faith and the rules of the faith, turn out to be a part of a terrorist organization that was viewed by the West as an Islamic far-right group? The perspective from Javeri where a Muslim woman is profoundly proud and loving with her religious practices when it comes to veiling is a refreshing sight, just like Abu-Lughod's story of the proud Pashtun women who choose to veil themselves from head to toe not for culturally expectations but their devotion to the religion.

Another short story in this collection, *The Urge*, explores the journey of a young girl and the veil. The thirteen-year-old unnamed girl was told by her mother that the rite of passage was for her to start veiling. She understood that in order to be a good Muslim woman in her family and society, she must veil. "It all began the day they put the all-encompassing dark garment on me. It was a passage to womanhood, they said. Now that I was older, I must wear a hijab. And an

abaya too. I must be good. A good Muslim. A good, Muslim, woman,” (Javeri, 14). The girl knew the cultural, familial, and societal expectations that were placed on her from a young age. Like Lila Abu-Lughod mentions in her book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Muslim women are born into families with certain social words where their choices are limited when it comes to the veil, especially Muslim women's desires being pushed away in these communities. Her mother encouraged her, telling her how lucky she was to be one of the girls who got to veil, unlike the other girls her age who got to choose. Her mother made it seem like it was a prize to be able to veil but the girl felt the opposite. She didn't feel that, instead she felt like she was being hidden from the world, as if her family had to be ashamed of her.

The expectations forced upon this thirteen-year-old girl not only causes her to have no sense of identity, but it forces her to explore her sexuality in a different way. The girl's first sexual experience happened when she and her aunt were dressing up as movie stars. They both don't wear revealing clothing and veil but in this instance the aunt was showing off her curvy figure in a tight dress. The young girl was curious about her aunt's curvy figure, so she placed her hand on her breast. They both stood still, not knowing what to do or say, until her uncle walked in. Her uncle banned her from seeing her aunt again but that was not the end of her exploring her sexuality. After the incident, she stayed home most of the time. She rarely went over to her family house or outside. The girl could not control her sexual urge anymore, so she went outside to the streets while her family slept. No one was out except the street merchant across the street. She hoped that he would not look at her but he did. “Before I could stop the urge, I lifted my abaya and flashed him. The shock on his face was enough to make me tremble in my skin. I covered myself quickly and ran inside, panting as if I had been chased. I was shaking. I couldn't stop,” (Javeri, 24). Flashing herself in front of this stranger, she was to satisfy her sexual urge since she had been locked in her home. The girl knew what she did was wrong

because of the fear she felt as she ran back inside her home. But she couldn't stop. She continued to flash the man until her mother noticed the lingering eyes between her daughter and the merchant. The girl was never taught anything about her sexuality, so she found her own way to explore her sexuality at a young age. Had she been taught anything about her sexuality or what it means to be a "woman" according to her family's understanding, she would have not felt the need to satisfy her urge in a way that could have ended up being harmful to her.

In Abu-Lughod's journal, *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?*, she mentions how the whole reason for the burqa was to symbolize women's modesty or respectability. It was used as a "symbolic separation of men's and women's spheres, as a part of the general association of women with family and home, not with the public spaces where strangers mingled" (Abu-Lughod, 785). Abu-Lughod discusses the symbol of the veil and how it became a symbol of women's modesty and respect. It was used as a way to put up a border between men and women when they are in public spaces. In this young girl's case, she opens the border between herself and the merchant by flashing herself in front of others. She uses the symbol of the veil in the opposite of what society had named the symbol to be, which can be seen as a way of empowerment. The girl empowered herself and her body but because of the societal expectations placed on her, the empowerment became shameful.

The mother was quick to marry off her daughter to the man, although the man was already married. Her mother was more worried about the shame her daughter would bring onto her family instead of looking out for the wellbeing of her daughter. The girl and her mother assumed that being married would allow her more freedom but that was the opposite of what happened. Her husband was worried that this girl would flash other men, just like how she would flash him, so he would order her to cover herself underneath her veil and over her veil as well. "The hijab was not enough for him. He made me wrap a large chadder over my hijab and abaya.

He got me to swear that I would always wear a bra and a vest. Even in the sweltering hot Karachi summers, I had to don a man's vest under my clothes, and leggings under my shalwar, lest I kicked my legs and someone saw my ankles," (Javeri, 26). Instead of being able to have the freedom to explore her sexuality and herself as a woman, there were more constraints put on her body, where the body ended up becoming a prison.

Eventually, her husband decided to lock her in a room, boarding up the room and the windows, keeping her away from the rest of the family. She gives birth alone, in a dark room. Everyone around her showed disappointment that she gave birth to a baby girl. In their eyes, a boy would bring them status while a girl will end up being a liability. The girl noticed that not even being a couple minutes old, the baby girl was already wrapped in cloth, hidden from the world. "I held the baby tightly. *Just born and already wrapped in a hijab*, I thought with a smile. *A thing to be hidden from the rest of the world - a man's honor but not his pride,*" (Javeri, 27). The girl knew that her daughter would have to live a restricted life, just like she had. Having a girl weighed a heavy burden on her, also weighing a burden on the baby, knowing that societal and cultural pressures had already been placed on her. To prevent her daughter from facing the same tribulations, the girl squeezed her daughter until she no longer was breathing. This young girl was forced to become a woman at a young age, without being told what it means to be a woman. There is an expectation placed on women when they veil like being seen as pure, innocent, and mature. The problem with these stories are not the fact that these young girls are forced to adorn what essentially is just a piece of clothing, but the fact that they are supposed to hold this pressure both physically and mentally without knowing what it really means to be a woman. religious, political, and philosophical beliefs. In October of 2022, the same E.U. court justice from 2021 ruled that the E.U. companies need to justify their ban on religious symbols.

The veil, burqa, hijab are all literal pieces of clothing that have become a symbol for anyone to use as a way to push a certain agenda.

Since its symbolic power has made the veil powerful enough to legislate against, it is important to note that the veil is complex and unique to every Muslim woman and they do not share the same stories. For some women, they are given the choice on whether they choose to veil or not, but for many women in countries like Iran and Afghanistan, they have been forced into veiling. This paper will showcase how the relationship between the veil and Muslim women all have unique circumstances, using the story collections *The Sea Cloak & Other Stories* by Nayrouz Qarmout and *Hijabitani* by Sabyn Javeri to reveal how some Muslim women choose to veil and how some women don't have that choice. These authors do not ignore how stringent societal and cultural norms are placed on many Muslim women at a young age, especially in the Eastern world, nor how countless women face near daily racism in the western world for choosing to veil. We also get to witness a Muslim woman having a loving relationship with the veil, which is rarely represented in the literature world.

Conclusion

Taking everything into account, the topic of the veil is neither black or white. It is a topic in which there are many factors you have to take into account like religion, politics, self-identity, representation and misrepresentation. The aim of the paper is not to persuade one to understand one side of the conversation but to consider how complex the topic of the veil has become for not just Muslim people but for the people in the West and East.

Going back to the initial question: what does the women's rights movement in the Arab world actually look like? In the process we discover that just as complex as a piece of cloth can be, so does the women's rights movement in the Arab world. When there is not enough coverage

over what the women rights movement looks like in the Arab world, there can't be a solid answer given. The lack of representation of Arab feminism and the women's rights movement doesn't allow the West to fully perceive how they assist in helping women achieve rights in the Arab world. Although the West, specifically the democracies, have yet to immerse themselves in the women's rights movement, shedding light on what is going on in Arab countries will allow us to acknowledge that there is a women's rights movement.

Looking at the stories from *The Sea Cloak* by Nayrouz Qarmout and *Hijabistan* by Saybn Javeri allowed us to see both sides to the story when it comes to the veil, a women who had immense love for her faith and want to do her best to honor her faith while there are two young girls who struggle to grasp at the concept that as they adorn the veil, they have entered womanhood. The intersections of gender, identity, and religion affect the lives of many women around the world but specifically Muslim women in these stories.

Works Cited

Golley, Nawar Al-Hassan. "Is feminism relevant to Arab women?" *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2004, pp. 521–536, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659042000191410>.

Grami, Amel. "Freedom of speech in contemporary Arab societies from a gender perspective." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2022, pp. 580–589, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537221079671>.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Pr, 2015.

Abdulhadi, Rabab, et al. *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*. Syracuse University Press, 2015.

Alayan, S., & Shehadeh, L. (2021). Religious symbolism and politics: hijab and resistance in Palestine. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 44(6), 1051–1067. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1883699>

Aslam, Saiyma. "RESURRECTING ARAB FEMINISM, NATIONALISM, AND COLONIALISM FROM SOCIAL AMNESIA." *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies = Alam-e-Niswan = Alam-i Nisvan*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2014, pp. 27-43. *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/resurrecting-arab-feminism-nationalism/docview/1676149734/se-2>.

Javeri, Sabyn. *Hijabistan*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2019.

Odeh, Lama Abu. "Post-Colonial Feminism and the Veil: Thinking the Difference." *Feminist Review*, no. 43, 1993, pp. 26–37. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395067>.

Qarmout, Nayrouz, et al. *The Sea Cloak*. Comma Press, 2019.